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Fransisco X. Amaral at UN Decol. Committee

STATEMENT BY MR. FRANSISCO XAVIER AMARAL

BEFORE THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON DECOLONIZATION
NEW YORK, 13 JULY 1994

[This is the printed statement as distributed by Mr. Amaral]

Mr. Chairman,

My name is Fransisco Xavier Amaral. I am the former chairman and founder of FRETILIN, the East Timorese Liberation Party, and later became the first President of the Democratic Republic of East Timor. I would like to thank the committee for this opportunity to speak on East Timor. I would also very much like to take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation to the United Nations, to the various Governments and NGOs, and to all people who have given their time and have worked on behalf of the East Timorese people. Your efforts and consideration are not unrecognized by the East Timorese.

Mr. Chairman,

I have not come to this Committee to condemn or speak against any individual or people. For I must believe that the actions that have been taken by those involved were done so with sincerity and in the belief that at the time it was correct and just. Nevertheless, since the debate on the status of East Timor emerged on the international scene I have noticed the tendency to view East Timorese history as having begun in 1975. Before that time, East Timor seems not to have existed and remains a mystery to the world. But we did exist. We were a colony of Portugal for 450 years. Sadly, having been forgotten by the world for so long, we have now emerged as an issue to be used by some to pursue their own agendas, again at the expense of the real interests of my people. This makes me both sad and angry, and this is why I have asked to speak here today.

The presentation of facts regarding East Timor have for the most part been one-sided, presented by people who like to indulge themselves with the sound of their voice and notions of what occurred. But if we are to be privileged to hear the facts of what has happened to East Timor, then lets have the full story. We must acknowledge the cruel colonial experience of the East Timorese, when the Portuguese came from the other side of the world to oppress, exploit, divide and kill my people. It was Portugal who in 1975 instigated the fighting and killing among the Timorese, turning brother against brother, and son against father. It was Portugal who deliberately left us in a state of civil war, washing their hands of our fate. This I know because I was one of the main participants in that civil war, struggling for the independence of East Timor.

If I may, I would like to relate some of my own experience, which has become linked with the history of East Timor. In 1946, following World War 11, when I was 11 years old, there was a large deportation of more than 1,000 Timorese to the island of Atauro. These people were considered dangerous because they could read and write. Only 200 survived, including 2 of my cousins, one of whom is still alive. For the head of my brother, who escaped this prison, the Portuguese Governor, Captain Antonio Maria Da Serpa Rosa, offered a good reward.

In 1956, in the aftermath of an uprising, a good number of women, children and old people were gunned down by Portuguese soldiers on the beaches of Watulari and Watukarbau. Others were deported to Angola, Mozambique and Portugal.

History will also show that it was Portugal that did not want United Nations involvement in East Timor after proclaiming it to be an overseas province. In fact, they even wrote in their constitution that Portugal remains attached to its responsibilities towards the decolonization and independence of East Timor. Yet, it was only after events took an unexpected direction that Portugal turned to the United Nations.

Today, certain Portuguese politicians persist in pursuing their own agenda, and in the process try to sell our dry bones to get what they want. Do they really believe that the East Timorese can survive another civil war. God forgive me but I do not believe so. I am convinced that if Indonesia, like Portugal, abandons East Timor that it will only plunge us once again into civil war, with perhaps even more dreadful consequences than the first.

Let us clearly and realistically look at what is happening in East Timor today. There are people who by holding out false hopes and unfounded dreams are turning the Timorese youth against each other, just as they did to my generation. 450 years of bitter life for us is apparently not enough for them to learn the lesson. And why, we must ask? To me the reason is clear. The East Timor issue has become a "political commodity" to be exploited to suit vested interests.

Let us look, Mr. Chairman, at some of the claims that are made. It is said that East Timor is a closed territory. Not true. East Timor is in fact open to serious, fair minded visitors and professional human rights organizations. It has been visited by foreign journalists, members of parliaments, diplomats, the ICRC and many other organizations. And in fact, while some of the reports of journalists have not been complimentary, the very fact that those reports were possible is testimony of the openness of East Timor. But I must admit, in one aspect East Timor is closed. It is closed to foreign activists and politicians whose main goal is not to obtain a firsthand view of the situation, but to manipulate the facts to their own interests. Had I, in fact, been a member of the Government I too would have restricted their access which can only be seen as a form of blackmail, pure and simple.

Much attention has been directed by the international community to the tragic Santa Cruz incident, which took place on 12 November 1991. How did this happen? The communique of the Fretilin secretariat issued on 24 February 1994 has itself stated that the incident took place "during a climate of extreme political and social turbulence", while confirming the presence of "provoking elements" within the crowd. My own inquiry, in which I contacted Timorese who were either directly involved as demonstrators or bystanders who witnessed the incident, also confirmed that the demonstration was wild, unruly and provocative.

I have not the slightest intention to justify the shooting. I deeply regret the incident. It was the blood of my Timorese brothers that spilled in Santa Cruz. But this profound regret was also shared by the people of Indonesia as well as President Soeharto, who has taken measures to prevent the recurrence of such an incident. Yet, there remain people who continue to use this incident for whatever purpose they may have against Indonesia. The nauseating thing as they go about this is that none of them have condemned the people who were behind the scene manipulating these youths, who are still at the dawn of their lives, into a situation of potential harm.

These people still continue to hold out false hope to the youth of East Timor. They willingly sacrifice their young lives, as they scheme and maneuver, and seek leverage with Jakarta. I had an occasion to speak with one of the young survivors of Santa Cruz and to ask him why he involved himself in political demonstrations. He said proudly, "as a young Timorese, I have to fight for independence." "You are too young to know what independence is all about and all its consequences" I said to him. To which he replied "Never Mind." I continued to ask him if he was sure independence will come soon. "Yes" he replied, "because according to the news I heard the Portuguese MPs will come to East Timor with the members of the UN". "How?" I asked "Do you really think the Portuguese will put political will and resources to put an end to a new civil war? I don't believe so because they had abandoned us before in order to get rid of us who they considered a burden those years. Look at Angola and Mozambique now. Are those Portuguese and those activists really helping to stop the suffering there?" There was no reply. I am sure if the same question were put to the international community, the reply would be the same.

The reason I relate this story is to illustrate to the Committee that the false hopes and dreams that are offered to the young people in East Timor have dire consequences. Here, in this committee, we may indulge ourselves in debate on questions of right or wrong, and whose interpretation of history is correct. After which time we fold our papers away, enjoy a good meal and turn to other preoccupations. For the young people of East Timor, however, such illusions call for the action of youth and prompt them to commit acts and risk their lives in a hopeless and questionable venture and for some at Santa Cruz to have made the ultimate sacrifice.

I myself had been fighting for the independence of East Timor and in fact I was among the few who began and led the fighting. But now I am proud to say that having analyzed all the pros and cons of the best way for East Timor to continue I consciously accepted Indonesian citizenship and for East Timor to be united to the other provinces of Indonesia. After all, Indonesia is a country of 360 ethnic groups. We East Timorese belong to the same ethnic group as those living in West Timor, a part of the Indonesian family since independence in 1945. Our ancestors were divided not because they wanted to be, but as a result of colonial design.

Should we continue to spill our blood and in sacrificing the lives of our young people and lose all hope for the future. Should we sacrifice lives because we have been prompted by foreign politicians and activists who remain safe and secure, and when all is said and done will write a fine eulogy for East Timor, express their regrets and move on to the next crusade where failure offers limited risk to themselves. Or should we realize that Indonesia's concern with East Timor has brought development, a hope for stability and an end to 450 years of occupation.

In conclusion, to my Timorese friends I would appeal that we Timorese stop listening to the promises and empty dreams given by politicians and their international friends. To be sure. many who work on behalf of East Timor do so out of sincerity, and I do really appreciate the efforts they extend. Indeed, we are all ultimately working towards a better world. But for the East Timorese, I believe we must recognize that the greater interests of global politics and of the big powers dictate our future. And if we are to secure for our children a better life, then our course must be through integration with Indonesia and as Indonesians work for our common prosperity. Integration means not only that East Timor belongs to Indonesia, but that the whole of Indonesia belongs to East Timor. And although Indonesia is a developing country, at least they are willing to share whatever limited resources they have to build East Timor. Our Timorese youth should be pushed hard to construct -- not destruct -- their future, and to build our native land, East Timor in particular and Indonesia in general. This is the dream that we should work on and realize. This is the surest way we can survive and prosper in this less than perfect world.

Thank you.